

**TT No.197: Mike Latham** - Sat 16 February. Scottish Junior Cup 5th Round. **Glenafton Athletic** 1-0 Musselborough Athletic; Att: 450 (est.); Admission: £5; 28pp prog, £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4\*.

For raw passion, excitement and incident few competitions rival the Scottish Junior Cup and on a gloriously sunny day after a freezing cold night there were plenty of good ties to choose from as the competition reached the last 16 stage.

I had mentioned my intended destination to a seasoned traveller during the week and he advised caution. Glenafton Athletic play at Loch Park in the coalmining Ayrshire town of New Cumnock. Though the surrounding scenery is breath-taking the town itself is decidedly less than pretty.

My friend told me of his concern at arriving at New Cumnock railway station to find a vandalised sign that read: 'Welcome to Hell' and said he remembered another sign in a local shop that stated English notes were not acceptable tender.

I decided to make a check call that the match was on upon reaching Dumfries and rang the number for the Glens Bar that the football club uses as headquarters. 'Could you tell me is the game on?' I enquired. 'The game's on,' came the brusque reply. 'Is the pitch OK then?' I replied. 'If it wasn't OK then the game wouldn't be on,' was the reply before the receiver went down.

So, the game was on.

The journey up the A76 through Thornhill and Sanquhar was scenic and in no time New Cumnock came into view, row upon row of drab concrete houses and a few shops scattered around the small town. Loch Park is located just off the A76 about a couple of hundred yards south of the railway station. With 45 minutes to go before the 2-15 pm kick-off a large crowd was building up and there was plenty of car parking opposite the ground on a patch of rough land.

Approaching the turnstiles with some trepidation I decided to tread carefully in case I got a hostile reception. I need not have feared. The gateman cheerfully accepted my English fiver, an equally pleasant club official proffered an excellent 28-page programme full of useful information and background and after buying a raffle ticket I headed for the Glens tea room. The purchase of a cup of tea allowed one a dip into the biscuit tin and, replete with a couple of custard creams, I set about exploring the ground.

I thought Loch Park was simply wonderful. There is a small covered stand on the half-way line, named in honour of the late Michael Morran, a long-serving club physio and trainer. To its left is a corrugated iron shed that housed some of the team's more vociferous young supporters. The rest of the ground is open standing with the area behind the far goal and along the far side having long stretches of grassy banks with a few benches to rest your weary legs. The area behind the nearside goal was formerly a training area and has been sold for housing. I was

informed that with the proceeds the club intended to renovate the club house and maybe introduce a new 3G pitch, similar to that recently installed at Petershill. That would be a shame as the Loch Park pitch is renowned as one of the best in the junior game.

The programme informed me that the Glenafton name is derived from the ground's location close to where the Afton Water flows into the River Nith and the site of a prehistoric loch. It all sounds idyllic and on such a beautiful afternoon, with the sun burning down from a cloudless blue sky and the rolling hills forming a scenic backdrop there were few better places to enjoy a game of football.

By kick-off time a healthy crowd had turned up, the home support massed on the club house side with around one hundred Musselburgh followers on the far side with surprisingly few spectators behind the goals. This was apparently the first ever meeting of the two clubs, with Glenafton from the West Region Super League and their visitors one level below from the East section. It was a relief to get the game on, as bad weather had restricted the Glens to just two games in 2008 before this one.

The playing action was fast and furious with little goalmouth action and fans from both sides were passionate in support of their team though there was no hostility between the opposing fans - in fact quite the opposite as the hospitality of the home officials was outstanding.

The bookings tally mounted and Musselburgh's ranks were depleted midway through the second half for a second yellow to one of their players. Just five minutes remained when the breakthrough came, as the Musselburgh keeper parried a dipping shot from distance and leading scorer Gormley snaffled the rebound. Home joy was unconfined. The visitors lost another player to a second yellow but their nine men pushed hard to the end. The Glens, beaten just once in the league this season, had been far below their best I was told but had just prevailed in a gripping tie that always crackled with interest and incident.

Everyone I spoke to was friendly and genuinely interested that someone had travelled up from England to the game. I met with no hostility at all, in fact quite the opposite. I was advised to try to return for a local derby against Cumnock or Auchinleck - they get quite lively, I am told.

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